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Title : RESCUE, REHABILITATION AND RELEASE OF A WILD ORPHANED KILLER WHALE CALF IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Category : Conservation

Student : Not Applicable

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Abstract : In June 2002, the NOAA Fisheries in cooperation with Fisheries and Oceans - Canada, the Vancouver Aquarium, numerous advocacy groups and private industry in Washington State and British Columbia rescued, rehabilitated and released a lone orphaned female juvenile killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) in the Pacific Northwest. The two year old whale, identified as A73 of the northern resident population, was separated from her natal pod and living in Puget Sound, several hundred kilometers from her home range. Scientists observed her during the spring of 2002 and reported that she appeared underweight, ketotic and suffered from a dermatological disease of unknown origin. They also reported that the lone whale was exhibiting increased interactions with vessels. Based on concerns for the health and safety of the whale and for boaters using Puget Sound, NOAA Fisheries assembled a team of experienced researchers, husbandry personnel and veterinarians to rescue A73. On June 14 the team engaged the whale by a small vessel and positioned her into a sling. She was lifted onto a barge for transport to a nearby floating net pen for health evaluation. Upon completion of medical testing and treatment, the whale was transported and was placed in a floating net pen in Dong Chong Bay, Hanson Island, B.C. On July 14, A73 was fitted with suction cup telemetry tags and released from the pen in the vicinity of related whales. She was subsequently sighted on multiple occasions with other whales and a network of observers monitored her behavior until the whales departed the area in October. This collaborative project was the first attempt to reunite a separated whale with its natal pod and the process provided a unique opportunity to assess the health status of a wild killer whale from a declining population.